

Marxism and Film

version 3.1

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Although Marx never went to the movies, Marxism has significantly affected filmmaking by politically committed directors such as Eisenstein and Gutierrez Alea as well as shaped the critical and historical analysis of film in aesthetic, institutional, social, and political terms. Fundamental Marxist concepts such as ideology profoundly inform most contemporary theories of and approaches to the analysis of individual films as well as to cinema as a social institution.

Marxism fuses several different sources and types of concern. From English political economy Marx developed his understanding of the economic foundation as fundamentally shaping (though not immutably determining) the social superstructure. From German philosophy, by inverting Hegelian idealism into a materialism that saw the world as historical and dynamically changing, Marx studied capitalism and capitalist societies as always in process. From French socialism, Marx drew his analysis of class-divided society with an active working class struggling for economic and social justice against the ruling capitalist class. Although internally divided by different movements, schools, and tendencies, and sometimes deformed into dogmatism in theory and dictatorship in practice, in its comprehensiveness, and at its best, Marxism provides a remarkably supple method for analysis. It combines practical progressive and democratic political goals with a social examination that centers on historical development and the dialectical potential for change. For this reason, Marxist analysis is an essential part of much contemporary gender, race/ethnicity, and post-colonial thinking in film studies, even when not explicitly underlined.

Marx and Engels did not write a full fledged aesthetics, but their comments on art (almost exclusively on literature) can be synthesized into a view which validates the Western classics and upholds a broadly construed realism in representation and narration. (Morawski; Solomon.) Marx recognized Balzac as personally a royalist in politics, but viewed his novels as narratives that accurately portrayed the complex social fabric of their time. Similarly, Lenin saw Tolstoi as a political reactionary but the author of novels which mirrored the social-political tensions of Russia. Such was the orthodoxy until the Bolshevik revolution when Marxism shaped cinema and the other arts. With Marxists holding state power, questions of entertainment vs./and instruction, traditional vs. radical form, drama vs. documentary, literary vs. visual communication, native vs. foreign (especially Hollywood) models, ethnic nationalisms vs. national culture, religious vs. secular culture, urban vs. rural, and popular audience vs. intellectual creators, were raised

as practical as well as theoretical matters. Intellectuals intensely argued and experienced both the economics of constructing a socialist film industry relying on box office receipts and the relation of creative output to party doctrines and priorities. Eisenstein, Vertov, Kuleshov, Pudovkin, and others wrote as makers while intellectuals from different tendencies participated in the highly political and polemical debates. (Taylor)

The crucible of the Soviet 20s first played out issues still important in later times and other places. In the USSR a national mass culture emerged, itself industrialized in production and partly responsive to market conditions in consumption. The state/party took control of information and journalism, as radio, the newsreel, and educational film developed. And given limited print literacy, print journalism was complemented and in many cases, superseded by audio and visual journalism. A comprehensive understanding of Soviet film demands understanding this larger context. Within the narrower realm of film aesthetics, the period dramatized several key issues. Because many artistic innovators joined the early years of the revolution, film experimentalism appeared in radical forms ranging from Dovshenko's lyrical poeticism to Vertov's rigorous montage of images (and later sound/image), and Eisenstein's epic and operatic work. The intellectual studies of the Russian Formalists contributed to the question of innovative forms matching a revolutionary content. Traditional forms were viewed as compromised, and the possibility of developing intellectual content through the means of film form and expressive stylistics asserted.

At the same time in the West, particularly Germany, a heightened awareness of capitalism's encroachment on the fields of culture and leisure developed with the rise of an urban mass culture audience and new means of mass produced and disseminated culture and journalism: cinema, recorded music, the radio, the picture newspaper, etc. Kracauer (1995), Brecht (1964), and Benjamin (1968) witnessed the expansion of the mass audience fearing for its passivity, but hoping for the new media as possibly liberating. As with the Russians, these thinkers saw cinema as changing perception and cognition as society moved from a written literacy to a visual dominance. New understandings of space and time, heralded in Cubist painting, seemed inherent to film. Informed by Freudian psychology, left intellectuals hoped that new art forms could stimulate new forms of politicized thinking. Brecht argued against the narcotic effects of dominant dramatic forms, seeing the realist-naturalist tradition since Ibsen as fitting the Aristotelean model of catharsis: raising political issues only to send the audience away purged of any fervor for change. He championed disruptive forms which provoked viewers to new thought.

The rise of German fascism offered a new challenge to Marxist theories, and produced a series of exchanges that marked important differences within Marxist analysis of mass culture. These differences continued in the debate after WW2, and in film studies after 1968. Lukacs advocated what amounted to a

continuation of 19C realism in literature, while Brecht argued for modernist artistic innovation. Benjamin agreed with Brecht and optimistically projected an inherently radical nature to film, while Marxist-influenced Frankfurt School thinkers Adorno and Horkheimer pessimistically concluded that fascist and US capitalist media were fundamentally alike in producing a passive public. (Adorno, Horkheimer)

While Soviet creative innovation and theoretical variety declined in the 1930's with Stalin's prescriptive doctrine of Socialist Realism in all the arts, in the West some new activities expanded the field of issues for Marxist aesthetics: examples include the development of partisan documentary and grass roots newsreel in the US with the Film and Photo League (Alexander, Campbell) and propaganda films for the Spanish Civil War. In the mid-30's, the abrupt shift in international Communist politics to build a broad anti-fascist Popular Front raised new issues of producing films with and for sympathizers and liberals, such as Renoir's *La Vie est à nous*. (Buchsbaum) Western communist parties encouraged working with and recruiting people in the dominant capitalist media industries, including Hollywood (which created a pretext for the notorious post-war Red scare and blacklist).

The post WW2 era saw the development of new aspects of Marxism and film. Hollywood emerged stronger than ever, dominating more of the world market. New socialist nations were established in Eastern Europe and China with attendant national cinemas, and Marxists were active in many national liberation movements in the developing world. Italian neo-realism provided a model of a humanistic socially committed film practice that eschewed the expensive entertainment and star system of Hollywood while validating matters of social justice, sympathetic depiction of lower classes, and vernacular expression in a thrifty mode. Neorealism influenced independent efforts in the capitalist world, and inspired directors in the developing world, particularly in Latin America and India. Critics too validated neorealism. Bazin as a liberal Catholic could find moral seriousness, while Kracauer, from a critique of mass culture and German expressionist film, found an alternative to frivolousness and emotional manipulation. (Kracauer 1947, 1960) Both posited an ontological basis for film in the replication of the physical world. In general, in the post-War era, Marxists favored an aesthetic of progressive realism which stood against the superficiality of entertainment and allowed for social criticism. Auteurists with progressive credentials such as Visconti and Renoir, Bimal Roy and Mrinal Sen, Kubrick and Welles were esteemed. After Stalin, alternatives to Soviet models gained attention, and new militancy provoked new thinking. In Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Cuba, significant directors and films appeared veering away from Socialist Realist orthodoxy.

In the 1960s a complex set of changes brought about a new stage in Marxist film analysis. Most of the intellectuals involved in developing this stage of film

studies were outside of or on the border of academia, coming from journalism, publishing, arts and education administration, or they were students and junior faculty in higher education, often in interdisciplinary or marginalized fields since academic film studies were still being established. Thus many were self-taught in the pertinent issues, and living through the process of discovering what a New Left could be or learning Marxist concepts after beginning political activism. At the same time, local conditions and traditions heavily inflected the reception and diffusion of these ideas. What “Marxist” meant in each place was distinctly different because of these contexts. And the local situation uniquely shaped the fusion of Marxism with other intellectual trends as well as the emergence of radical cultural analysis. This history played out in diverse radical film magazines. In France *Positif*, *Cinethique*, and *Cahiers du cinema*; in the UK *Screen and Framework*, in Canada, *Cine-Tracts* and *CineAction*, and in the US *Cineaste* and *Jump Cut*.

By the early 1970s, the center of gravity of Marxist film analysis shifted. Concepts of ideology and realism were drastically re-oriented. The analysis of the dominant Hollywood cinema and European art film as “illusionist,” and that illusion having an ideological effect, evolved from several developments. The optimism of 19C Marxism in assuming that revolution would take place in the most industrialized nations as trade union and electoral politics heightened worker's consciousness and capacity for revolutionary change was severely damaged by the nationalist division during WW1, the appearance of revolution in Russia (the most backward of the capitalist nations with an overwhelming peasant base), and the acceptance of fascism by the many of the masses in Italy and Germany. As a result, western Marxists sought deeper explanations. For some, insights from Freudian psychology showed the persistence of deep patterns in the conscious/unconscious mind. For others the insights of Lenin's contemporary, the Italian Gramsci were helpful, particularly in his emphasis that people were not simply coercively forced by the state's police authority, but also manipulated by the hegemony or dominance of ruling class cultural and social structures of society to stay in place, to accept the existing order as “natural.”

In classical Marxism, ideology was generally understood as the propagation of false ideas by the capitalist class, producing a “false consciousness” in the masses which could then be countered by revolutionary “correct ideas.” In the 60s, ideology was increasingly understood as a structural condition operating like myth in traditional societies described by Levi-Strauss: fairly complex patterns which embodied narratives and contradictions to functionally maintain order. In modern cultures, the mass media could be seen as promulgating similar myths. (Barthes) French philosopher Althusser drew from Mao, Gramsci, and Lacanian psychoanalysis to posit a concept of ideology which stressed that people are socially positioned in power relationships and internalize this in their unconscious: a concept given further elaboration by Foucault who emphasized the social basis of ideology by considering institutions and history. Such an

understanding of ideology meshed well with developments in semiotics and long standing analogies between film and dreams, daydreams, hypnotic and other liminal mental states, although it tended to produce a pessimistic deterministic view of the potential for change. Althusser argued that revolutionary theory could move beyond ideology: a notion that (few noticed) reproduced the Leninist model with Marxist theorists occupying the position formerly held by vanguard party activists in relation to the proletariat. (Althusser)

This view lead in one direction to a position virtually identical with the Frankfurt School's pessimistic denunciation of mainstream film as narcotic, or circus-like distractions, validating only rigorous high modernist art (Schoenberg, Joyce) as truly revolutionary. Althusser also inspired arguments that by resisting the illusionary cinema of "bourgeois" realism, a radical modernist form could be wedded to a politically radical content, leading some critics to validate directors such as Oshima and Straub-Huillet. With translations and new critical attention, Benjamin's artwork essay and other writings gained new attention, while the revived Brecht/Lukacs debate became the theoretical ground for an endorsement of formal innovation and explicit politics over traditional realism.

Simultaneously, Eisenstein's films and writings were recast as aesthetic experiments, and Vertov's self-reflexive *Chelovek's kinoapparatom* (1929, Soviet Union) rediscovered as an avant garde work which explored the epistemology of film. Meanwhile in the developing world, Solanas and Getino called for a militant Third Cinema poised apart from Hollywood and auteurist art cinema, (Solanas) and Garcia Espinosa defended Cuban cinema as necessarily "imperfect" compared to high production value Hollywood, but to be valued for its political content. (Garcia Espinosa) Complemented by a wave of militant and innovative films in Latin America (and later Africa and South Asia), such arguments strengthened the case for a militant aesthetics.

It is a truism that c. 1970 contemporary film studies came into being through the weaving together of Marxism, structuralism, Saussurean linguistics, psychoanalysis, and semiotics, and then was further elaborated in post-structuralist terms. In some cases the changes amounted to complete reversals. The tradition of social documentary was called into question because of its unreflective realism. A European auteur such as Bergman, previously praised for his high moral seriousness, was critiqued for being too theatrical by an increasingly cinematically sophisticated audience, or *Persona* (1966, Sweden) was validated for its complex self-referentiality. But the biggest change came in a shift in the left analysis of commercial entertainment cinema as Hollywood film was reinterpreted as fundamentally realist. Thus a normative realism, understood as identical with Hollywood's practice of illusionism, was seen as producing a coherent imaginary subject position. Audience pleasure was seen as originating in the cinematic apparatus (the ensemble of physical and social conventions that govern the cinema institution including the subject's psychology) and its illusionism, rather than contingent narrative practices, performance, and

spectacle. In contrast, a self-reflexive modernism and avant garde practices can be read as themselves producing a dispersal of meaning and deconstructing the subject position, thus calling into question both illusionism and the dominant ideology. As a result some interpreted an extreme formalism as sufficient to establish a work as politically radical, irrespective of content, as, for example, with Cahiers du cinema's validation of Jerry Lewis's *The Bellboy* (1960, USA), and in Gidal's advocacy of "structural/materialist" films, while others critiqued the idea that self-reflexivity alone was political. (Gidal, Polan)

While the overall change can be summed up as the "politicizing of form," the precise working out varied from individual to individual, by nation, and with uneven access to ideas and films in translation. It also produced logical inconsistencies. For example, in line with their then-Maoist politics, in 1972 Cahiers du cinema enthusiastically validated the Godard-Gorin "Groupe Dziga Vertov" films (1968-72)--intensely radical in form and content--as well as formally conventional Chinese documentaries. Given the investment in auteurist approaches to Hollywood prevalent in the 60s, French and Anglophone critics who were pushed in the direction of Marxist thought and politics by the heated political climate of the times, tended to justify the auteurist canon using the new insights of Marxist thought. Cahiers du cinema put forth a broad agenda for criticism in 1969, "Cinema/ideologie/critique," which granted considerable leeway for considering films which appeared to be under the dominant ideology, but which escaped through formal "cracks and fissures". (Comolli) The classic demonstration was their analysis of Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939, USA) which argued that the director's "inscription" of a unique "writing" opened gaps in the text which were evidence providing an escape from ideology. (The editors, Cahiers du cinema, 1976) Left authorship analysis promoted various figures such as Nicholas Ray and Sirk who could be read as offering a fundamental critique of social institutions. The critics' motivation can be understood as stemming both from a desire to validate popular film and from the persistence of an aesthetic centered on creators. Following Bazin's dictum that "style creates meaning," and repeating the argument of conservative auteurist Sarris, left critics asserted Sirk's formal manipulations called his ostensibly shallow and glossy melodramas into question. For example, Paul Willemen concluded: "...by altering the rhetoric of bourgeois melodrama, through stylization and parody, Sirk's films distanciate themselves from the bourgeois ideology." (Willemen: 67) Essentially these positions attributed class politics to cinema style. In the same vein, Godard's *Le Week-end* (1967, France) was interpreted by Henderson as having "a non--bourgeois camera style" without further specification as to whether that was then a working class style. (Henderson, 1972, 1976)

The errors of this type of analysis were based on conflating two false concepts: that ideology directly reflects class identity, and that the film was the sole source of meaning. As further consideration (including critiques of some ludicrous case studies) demonstrated the flaws, positions were modified and ideology was

understood in a much more flexible way. While the critique of simple reflectionist concepts of “realism” in cinematography and as an aesthetic was maintained, and the ideological nature of the apparatus was understood, increasingly theory turned to examining the meaning of a film as produced by an interaction between a text and a spectator who was understood not as an ahistorical “subject” but as an historical person with social attributes of gender, race, class, age, nationality, etc.--all of which shaped the interpretive context. With history re-admitted to the analytic frame, institutional analyses, including economic issues were considered.

Marxism contributes to contemporary film studies in historical, economic, and ideological analysis, as well as media activism. Drawing on its founders' own interests and methods, Marxism emphasizes historical analysis which aims at providing a broad context stressing multiple interacting factors including social, economic, and political connections. The revival of historical analysis reminds us that in an earlier period many film historians were Marxists: Sadoul, Kracauer, Leyda, and Lewis Jacobs. Contemporary counterparts include Burch, Chanan, Elsaesser, James, Kreimeier, and Staiger. Studies of the class composition of cinema's past audiences, the representation of class in film, and the labor history of the cinema industry obviously interest Marxists. Wary of simple reflectionist models of film and society, Marxists remain committed to understanding the relation of film art and social/political activity. Two persistent themes are the historical film (a staple of Marxist filmmaking) and the analysis of current history in terms of the proliferation and combination of new media technologies.

Because of its inherent interest in industrial and global economics, Marxism is the primary methodology of most economic analysis of film and mass communications in general. Such studies involve not only questions of finance, production, and marketing, but also state policies. (Pendakur, Wasko) Combined with studio and industrial histories, in the past such analyses have often made sweeping generalizations about actual films and their reception, but a younger generation of researchers combine political economy with textual and reception analysis and avoid simplistic assertions of economic determinism of cultural production. Increasingly issues of transnational capital, globalization of the market, capitalist ownership and control of national film cultures, and intellectual property rights focus the analysis. (Mattelart and Mattelart)

Marxism has had a long standing relation to questions of political action and media. This has tended to be expressed in terms of films for propaganda and agitation, and especially in terms of a class or anti-imperialist analysis. The validation of new films/videos and the promotion of documentary has been at stake. (Waugh, Steven) The development of a more sophisticated Marxist media theory has affected makers since the 60s, especially with the postmodernist increase in self-conscious analytical/expository strategies combined with the social documentary tradition. Such work often discusses social/political issues

such as race, nationalism, and AIDS, and critiques the dominant media representation of those concerns.

Today Marxism seems most dynamic when it combines its analysis of class with an analysis of gender, race, national, postcolonial and other issues raised by progressive social/political movements. Some claim that the fall of the Soviet Union made Marxism obsolete. However as a critical analysis of capitalist societies, at a time when the gap between rich and poor nations and between capitalist and working classes within those nations is growing, its relevance is assured.

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[NB: although the conventional style in Latin America is to use the patronym (Gutierrez) this individual chose to use the matronym (Alea) for identification]

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